

Art and *La Revolución Mexicana* (1910-1920)

The development of Mexican art and culture from the beginning of the last century was intertwined with the violent struggle of the Mexican Revolution ending the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, that lasted from 1884 until 1911. Francisco Madero was elected President in 1911. In 1913 he was assassinated /overthrown by Victoriano Huerta who became president from 1913 until 1914. Venustiano Carranza took power in 1915 and in 1917 the Mexican Constitution was created (the country's ruling document to this day). This was the first such document in the world to set out social rights, serving as a model for the Russian Constitution of 1918 and the Weimar Constitution of 1919.

A new vision for art and culture was born, away from the European trends and fads that had been prevalent since the Spanish Conquest. This renaissance arose out of the interaction between art and politics.

Publications like *La Vanguardia* (1915), with the painter Doctor Atl as director together with illustrators such as José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros informed with humor and satire about the events of the time: caricature became the tool to inform the illiterate population.

José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), illustrator, printmaker and engraver, famous for his skulls and skeletons (*calaveras*), reinterpreted the pre-Columbian cult to death (*Día de los Muertos*) and his influence continues at the TGP (Taller de la Gráfica Popular / Popular Graphic Workshop) and ASSARO (Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca / Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca).



La Calavera Revolucionaria. José Guadalupe Posada

The EMBA (Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes / National Fine Arts School) was the main artistic influence in Mexico and it was from within these classrooms publications and caricature spread the revolutionary messages which, in scale and influence, developed into the major art movement ever seen in Latin America: the Muralist Movement lead by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

This Muralist Movement along with most of the art expressions of the time, following the concept of art for the people, provided a new vision of Mexico: indigenous peoples became part of the official culture for the first time since the conquest.

The National Schools of Music, Fine Arts, Archeology, History and Etnology and the Departments of Culture, Drawing and Artcrafts along with exhibitions were encouraged by the new Revolutionary Government.

José Vasoncelos as director of the Universidad Nacional was a force in the inclusion of indigenous cultures and in democratizing the education; his *Escuelas al Aire Libre* (Outdoor Schools) all over the country (free and no entry requisites) played a vital role in the development of the art. The teachers were art graduates who were encouraged to return to their places of origin to teach. Some of the classes had 150–170 students at a time.

The *Corrido* (a sung ballad that narrates a historical event) was also part of the popular culture of the Revolution, honouring heroes like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, and the *Adelitas* (woman who followed combatants and made tortillas among the bullets).

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Biography:

Xavier Meade (1951) studied Architecture in his native Mexico City at the Universidad Anahuac, with Masters in Architecture from Auckland University. Academic and researcher since 1982 in the fields of eco-design and visual arts at Wintec, Hamilton. He has exhibited in solo and group shows in Mexico, Cuba, Aotearoa, Holland, Spain, Scotland and China since 1978 and completed collaborative projects bridging the politics and cultures of Latin America and Aotearoa.

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Diego Rivera: *"[Cubism] was a revolutionary movement that questioned everything that had been said and done about art before. Did not consider anything sacred. As if the world would be shattered into pieces, so that it would never be the same again, so cubism broke forms as they had been seen for centuries and began to create from the fragments new forms, new objects, new patterns and, ultimately, new worlds."*

From the constitution of 1917 under a relative political stability artists like Leal, Hernán, Maugard, Montenegro looked for a national flavour with themes from before the conquest, the colony, the folklore, the indigenous, with the intention of moving away from the antiquated academicism of San Carlos (the most influential art school).

Dr Atl (Gerardo Murillo) in 1914 advocated the artists of Mexico to produce works whose purpose is "the material, political and moral regeneration of the nation."

The 1920s were the beginning of a time of national renewal, intellectuals and politicians understood the importance of creating new symbols of Mexican identity.

"Art and knowledge should serve to improve the conditions of the people." José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education.

Historian and art critic from the US Walter Pash (1883-1958) after spending time with Rivera and Orozco on the scaffolding of the murals in the early 1920s said: *"Everything was for the Revolution: men enthusiasm in teaching people how to read and write, the beauty of the new buildings, the cheap editions of the classics, popular dancing and music[...] I doubt that the latter day Russia can show the spirit of the new life I saw in Mexico...>>"*.

Caricature was one of the means to negotiate the relationship between tradition, social stereotypes, political commitment and the hegemonic visual tradition of the West. One of the key figures and precursor of the revolutionary commitment was José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913).

The practice of reproducing figures or details from murals, sometimes with slight changes to give them autonomy, was something new. >>>> Orozco

Taller de Gráfica Popular TGF. Leopoldo Méndez... also produced sets and titles for films that promoted the revolutionary consciousness, such as *Rio Escondido*, *El Rebozo de Soledad*, etc.

Wikipedia;

The **Battle of Columbus** (**Burning of Columbus** or the **Columbus Raid**), March 9, 1916, began as a [raid](#) conducted by [Pancho Villa's Division of the North](#) on the small [United States](#) border town of [Columbus, New Mexico](#), located 3 miles (4.8 km) north of the border.

The raid escalated into a full-scale battle between Villistas and the [United States Army](#). Villa himself led the assault, only to be driven back into Mexico by elements of the [13th Cavalry Regiment](#) stationed at the town. The attack angered Americans and President [Woodrow Wilson](#) ordered the [Punitive Expedition](#) in which the US Army invaded Mexico in an unsuccessful attempt to capture General Villa.

The Mexican Renaissance, the most important artistic movement of the twentieth century in Mexico came about after the armed struggle of 1910. The new revolutionary discourse was based on the interaction of the fields of art and politics.

The intellectuals fought with their own weapons in the classrooms, with the written message and the caricature.

In 1921 José Vasconcelos who was in charge of Public Education obtained 20% of the national budget. Vasconcelos proposed to promote cultural and racial mestizaje, while freeing itself from the Anglo-Saxon cultural and economic imperialism initiated since independence. The greatest influence on the educational programs of Vasconcelos was the Russian educator Antonio Lunacharski.

Muralism: public art sponsored by the state.
Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (Antiguo Colegio de San Idelfonso)

During the 1920s Diego Rivera consolidated his fame based on the quality of his work, his skillful handling of his own image in the press and in his relations with people in power. This led him to be the leader of the Mexican muralism and to paint murals in Mexico and the United States.

Rivera used compositional and narrative structures of the comic strip. He made art as a servant of the State, public work for didactic purposes, propaganda at the service of the doctrine of triumphant revolution.

From 1917, with the creation of the Mexican Constitution and the relative calm in the country began an ideological struggle focused on defining the *mexicanidad* based on the revolution of 1910. The new proposal of national unity included the assumed innate native artistic abilities of the native and his prehispanic 'glorious' past, thus taking

into account in the national ideology the indigenous peoples, marginalized since the conquest. After all, the role and presence of the indigenous artist in the artistic renaissance was merely symbolic.

Orozco's conception of the revolution was universal and transcendental; spoke in the generic sense of the sacrifice implicit in armed struggle, separation and loss of loved ones, the impossibility of cultivating or fertilizing the land.

Siqueiros combined theoretical and formal pictorial advances with a revolutionary aesthetic fueled by political militancy.